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# **In It for the Long Haul: How Rural Veteran Teachers Persist in the Profession**

**DeJuanna Parker, Ph.D.**

## **Abstract**

Research has determined that experienced teachers are more effective in the classroom; thus, efforts to retain them in the profession becomes an important issue to all stakeholders (Mirza, 2011). The key to retention of this valuable educational coalition lies partly in understanding factors that influence persistence in the profession. Respect, recognition, and connectedness with the community, along with intrinsic rewards, and the “call” to teach are prominent components in veteran teachers’ decisions to remain in the profession (McCoy, 2006). Educational executives may find that understanding these factors may be useful in developing practices to help new teachers become veteran teachers.

## **Introduction**

Experienced teachers are vitally important to education. Ladd (2013) asserted experienced teachers have a greater impact on student achievement than do inexperienced teachers. Additionally, Ladd (2013) purported experienced teachers with 20 years of classroom experience are more pedagogically effective than are those with fewer years in the profession. Veteran teachers also contribute to the growth and development of novice teachers and add value to the school community (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2010; Glazer, 2013; Grissom, 2011; Ladd, 2013). With attrition rates as high as 40% for teachers with fewer than five years’ experience (Ingersoll, 2004), retaining effective veteran teachers becomes even more significant.

Research supports that teachers with 10 or more years of experience demonstrate attrition at a much lower rate than novice teachers do (Keigher, 2010). Studies have reported a myriad of factors that influence veteran teacher retention. Those factors relate to salary, advancement, and administrator support. Recent research, however, has revealed specific persistence factors of veteran teachers, which are not explored deeply in previous findings. These factors are the focus of this writing.

## **Rural Community Embeddedness and Respect**

## **The Rural Community**

Schools are often a central component of a community; therefore, especially in rural areas, teachers become prominent citizens because of their connection to the school (Fowler, 2012). School-community relationships are often representative of rural culture, which is now more geographically and socioeconomically diverse than in the past. Suburban sprawl has contributed partially to the rural shift. Researchers have found evidence of a juxtaposition of residents who desire the “rural life”, but continue to desire metropolitan amenities. Rural districts, therefore, have become less rural in the traditional sense.

## **Rural Community Embeddedness**

Jaques (2014) conducted a grounded theory study to investigate the culture of a small, rural, and diverse community of Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo populations in Colorado. The core issue that emerged from the data described the behavior of how people become involved in and integrated into a community, what the researcher termed as “binding to the community” (Jaques, 2014). The key concepts of binding to community consist of the following:

- prospecting to seek out a place to call home
- outreaching to make purposeful contact with community members and organizations
- being guided to learn from and interact with community members and organizations to gain knowledge of community norms, traditions, and values
- being accepted into the community through being valued and finding common threads; and finally,
- exercising community to perpetuate norms, rituals, and practices through continued interaction with the other community members.

The researcher also noted that for people who are new to the community, efforts to develop and cultivate relationships are best approached through the workplace. Consequent efforts to integrate include neighboring activities directly related to community cohesion, such as attending local events, and joining organizations (Jaques, 2014). These findings revealed that becoming a member of the

community can be a protracted process for newcomers, as the time frame for completion of each part of the binding process may vary from one individual to another.

Author (2016) claims that connectedness, respect, and involvement in the community are factors of veteran teacher persistence. Author (2016) supports the binding process offered by Jacques (2014). Veteran teachers developed connectedness in the community through seeking out a place to call home, interacting with and learning from residents, gaining acceptance, and perpetuating community culture. One participant noted,

When we were searching for a home and talking to people about where to live, we actually went to the police station in town and the Chief gave us some of his time to talk about the community. We had a daughter in elementary and one in high school, and the principals of the schools gave us their time. I can't think of anything else that would draw us to the community more than this display of rural community culture.

### **Respect in the Rural Community**

When asked about community attitudes towards veteran teachers, participants in the phenomenological study responded that they were well regarded in the community, and were respected professionally and personally (Author, 2016). Another respondent explained that behavior towards teachers by the community is not limited to simple respect within the school setting, but respect was evidenced through widespread recognition in the community. The veteran Art teacher remarked, "When out and about in public, my husband says I should run for public office since I am met and greeted by students/parents/alumni wherever I go."

Much of the recognition and respect derives from veteran teachers' community embeddedness. Some are lifelong community members, but many others are transplants from other areas who have made the school district locale their home. As such, these educational professionals are able to leverage social standing in the community with respect in the school setting, and vice versa. One female English teacher shared, "Having born and raised my children here, in the public school system, in school and community sports programs and in church, after 39 years here, it is "home."". Another teacher intimated,

When I first arrived, I bought a small farm and raised horses and crops. This gave me something in common to talk about with the natives and mitigated the idea I was just another Yankee schoolteacher.

Many of the study participants frequent businesses owned by parents of their students. These seasoned professionals sponsor community sports teams, attend local celebrations, and support local charity events. In all, the teachers who feel that they are connected to the community, and are respected in the community, tend to persist in the profession (Author, 2016; Battatori, 2009; Huysman, 2007)

### **Intrinsic Rewards of Teaching in a Rural Community**

Day and Gu (2009) described the outward expression of commitment and internal rewards found in motivated teachers who believe in making a difference to student learning and achievement. In the emotional context of teaching, pupils' progress and positive teacher-student relationships provide the main source of job satisfaction, especially for teachers in the later phases of professional life. Many teachers indicated professional and personal interactions with students help to renew commitment to the profession (Meister, 2010).

### **Student Success**

Author (2016) supports Meister (2010) regarding the relationship between internal rewards gained from student success and veteran teacher persistence. Author (2016) characterized commitment to the teaching profession as revealed through dedication to student success, willingness to take measures to ensure success occurs, and fulfillment experienced as a result. Each participant in the study spoke of actions undertaken to ensure student success, including staying late hours after school for supplemental instruction, and taking on mentor roles for students (Author, 2016). One male History teacher related,

Watching them get it. Watching students grow or have original ideas. When they actually get excited about doing something well. Laughing together. Having dedicated colleagues. Getting feedback from adult students after years have passed. These are the fruits of my labor.

Another participant shared,

I write numerous letters of recommendation for students and being asked to do this is time-consuming but gratifying. I have had students come back years later and tell me that my class was one of their favorites or that they are going into teaching because of my influence. Helping a student be the first to graduate from high school and college in his family. That, to me, is what keeps me coming back.

Another 22-year veteran teacher related,

I was in line at the grocery store, and someone touched my shoulder. I wasn't sure what to do because I was at the store by myself. But then a soft male voice spoke in my ear and said 'Out of the night that covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever God may be for my unconquerable soul ...' It was a former student reciting a poem I had made them memorize in my 10th grade English class. He went on to recite the entire poem while we were still in line. It brought me to tears. It had been at least 10 years since he had been in my class. But I was so touched, and in that moment, I was even more convinced than ever that my work as a teacher was important because I had touched this student. He asked if I were still teaching, and I said that I was. He smiled and said that he was glad. These are the things that reinforce my decision to teach. They're the true rewards.

These findings support earlier work of Edwards (2003), Hofstetter (2014), and Kearney (2011), who held that though the needs of veteran teachers were not always met, rewards were found in watching children learn, creating learning cultures in the classroom and promoting learning in the community. Moreover, Taylor et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study seeking to find the rewards that teachers say keep them in the profession. The investigators found that intrinsic motivators had most influence on intentions to stay in the profession.

### **A Calling to Teach**

Crosswell (2006) asserted passion as a disposition aligned with teachers' personal attributes. This dimension relates to other personal factors such as identity, values, and beliefs that teachers bring into professional roles. Furthermore, Crosswell (2006) found these factors to be influential in terms of commitment and longevity. Many teachers feel a passionate connection to teaching (Crosswell, 2006;

Day, 2004). Research has found that teachers' passions, coupled with other factors such as ideology and identity, influence willingness to commit and reveal ways in which commitment is demonstrated in the school context (Crosswell, 2006; Day, 2004).

Author (2016) concurs with earlier findings related to veteran teachers' emotional attachment and sense of calling as factors of professional persistence. In examining attachment, respondents reported having a strong emotional attachment to the profession and difficulty with the idea of leaving. One respondent said,

I am more attached to this school than I have been to any except the first one. I am still dedicated to teaching, not just because this is all I've done for 30 years, but because it's what I should have been doing for the past 30 years. I am the job.

Another participant shared,

After doing this for 40 years, I may retire, but I will never be able to stop teaching. I am currently applying for a position at the local community college and will still give lectures to various groups. I was at some function not too long ago, and someone I was talking to said, 'I know you're a teacher because you have been lecturing me for the past 10 minutes.' I thought that was spot-on. I mean, come on, I'm a teacher through and through. I don't care what the situation is, I will find a way to teach.

In many instances, the attachment to teaching was related to a deeply rooted, "calling" to teach based on values and beliefs. A qualitative collective case study was conducted with teachers in an inner-ring suburban district located in very close proximity to an inner-city urban area. The teachers in the study had 10 years of teaching experience. The study found that teachers' personal values based on a sense of obligation to make a difference in the community influenced the career choice to become and remain teachers (Beasley, 2013). Author (2016) returned similar findings. One 20-year English teacher noted,

I didn't necessarily have the best experiences in high school. My dad became an alcoholic (non-abusive, just absent), my mom a recluse, I wasn't in the 'popular' crowd nor was I a top student. I think part of my calling came from the fact that I understand this pain in others. My dad became sober and by the time I got to college,

I was an 'A' student. I had always been a reader, so being an English teacher was a win-win. I have an empathy and a natural love of learning that I felt obliged to pass on. Is this a calling? I think so. I never felt that I had to do something else, just teaching.

A veteran Art teacher intimated,

Of course, teaching is a calling. There are people who are knowledgeable in a subject, but do not have the rapport to actually be a teacher. Finding a way to reach a hundred different students each day requires a special ability. I feel that teaching is a gift and thus a passion. Not everyone can teach. Those who can, teach.

Rural veteran professionals noted the consuming nature of teaching and the need for inner strength to accomplish the goal of having a long and successful career. Some estimated that the call to teach comes from understanding the pain of others. The rural veteran professionals noted the consuming nature of teaching and the need for inner strength to accomplish the goal of having a long and successful career (Author, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

With so many novice teachers leaving the profession, it is imperative for educational policy makers, district school boards, and building administrators to understand how to retain veteran teachers. Research supports that experienced teachers are essential to education because of the impact they exert on student development and success. One of the first steps to retaining these valuable professionals is to understand and leverage factors influencing the persistence of veteran teachers, especially in rural and other hard-to-staff areas where need is high. Knowledge of persistence factors such as community connections, respect, intrinsic rewards, and deep attachment may help decision makers to develop initiatives specifically targeted to retention of this population of educational professionals.

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